

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

Volume XI, Number 25

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of November 13, 1950

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Theatre Openings

"The Country Girl"
"The Lady's Not for Burning"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Country Girl"

The New York Times

November 11, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

At last Clifford Odets has really got down to work. "The Country Girl," which opened at the Lyceum last evening, is the best play he has written for years, and perhaps the best of his career. Freed from a lot of fixations and mannerisms he has gone straight to the heart of three characters in a vivid and stinging play about theatre people, and written about them with pitiless integrity.

He has always been a pungent theatrical writer with an actor's special knowledge of stage expression. In "The Country Girl" that is a gift that has brought us a memorable reward. For Paul Kelly, Uta Hagen and Steven Hill are extraordinary actors and they are filling the Lyceum Theatre with some of the most exciting acting of the year.

Don't look for anything extraordinary in the way of story. For "The Country Girl" is only an account of how a rather phlegmatic

and taciturn wife and an arrogant director reclaim an old star from drunkenness and put him back in the theatre. At least for the time being. Mr. Odets has set the ailing old cosmos to one side and written a plain, human story.

Even in his bad plays he cannot write without distinction. In his good plays every line has tension and every scene is full of power. And the impact of "The Country Girl" derives, not from the story, but from the cruel penetration into the secret corners of some human hearts—the twists of temperament, the agony of failure, the desperation with which people hang together, the quicksilver of personalities in conflict and confusion. Since Mr. Odets is a man with a highly wrought personality, he understands the pain and the wounding uncertainties with which similar people blunder through their affairs. In "The Country Girl" he has expressed it with strength, brilliance and candor.

Serving as his own director, he has found a group of interesting actors who can bring his episodic play into a kind of life that practically burns a hole right through the theatre. Boris Aronson in his most appreciative mood has designed an inviting sequence of shabby backstage scenes and lighted them—especially the opening scene—with loveliness and wonder. As in the case of "Detective Story,"

Mr. Aronson has given dingy materials the mood and luster of art.

Mr. Kelly plays the part of the derelict actor who fights his way out of alcoholism back to sanity through a series of exhausting crises. Miss Hagen is the wife who understands him and has no illusions. Mr. Hill is the megalomaniac who makes diagnoses that are terribly wrong and wounds everyone who gets in his way.

There are some other parts that are happily cast and pleasantly acted—Phyllis Love as an ingénue, Peter Kass, Louis Veda Quince, Joseph Sullivan and Tony Albert as various theatre people involved in the blasting ordeal of a new production.

But according to the structure of the play, Mr. Kelly, Miss Hagen and Mr. Hill carry the burden of the performance with a drive and an intensity that are overwhelming in the big scenes. Mr. Kelly's lead and muscular honesty, Miss Hagen's womanly strength and disillusioned detachment, Mr. Hill's shrill violence are all tangled and interwoven into a headlong performance.

Since the play is basically theatrical, the fury of the performance is valid. None of the effects is gaudy or meretricious. For Mr. Odets is master of the medium and the big strokes become him. In the past he has written on some more portentous subjects. But he has

"THE COUNTRY GIRL"

Play by Clifford Odets; staged by Mr. Odets; settings by Boris Aronson; costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone; presented by Dwight Deere Wiman at the Lyceum Theatre, November 10, 1950. The cast:

Bernie Dodd.....Steven Hill
Larry.....Peter Kass
Phil Cook.....Louis Veda Quince
Paul Unger.....Joseph Sullivan
Nancy Stoddard.....Phyllis Love
Frank Elgin.....Paul Kelly
Georgie Elgin.....Uta Hagen
Ralph.....Tony Albert

Synopsis: The action is contemporary. Act I. Scene 1. The stage of a New York theatre. Scene 2. A furnished room, later the same day. Scene 3. The stage, ten days later. Scene 4. The furnished room, a week later. Scene 5. A dressing room in a Boston theatre after midnight a week later. Act II. Scene 1. The Boston dressing room, a few nights later. Scene 2. The same, the next day. Scene 3. A dressing room in a New York theatre, evening, some weeks later.

never written with so profound a knowledge of people as he discloses in "The Country Girl."

DAILY NEWS

November 11, 1950

Clifford Odets 'The Country Girl' An Absorbing, Well-Played Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Clifford Odets' new play, "The Country Girl," is good theatre, and it was given an exciting first performance at the Lyceum Theatre last evening by Uta Hagen, Paul Kelly and Steven Hill.

Mr. Odets seems to have licked and healed the wounds he gave himself with "The Big Knife" two seasons ago. That play was a windy job. Last night's drama is tight, taut and trim, and it has been very well directed by Mr. Odets himself.

"The Country Girl" is a backstage story about a one time star who has become a drunkard, his compassionate and intelligent wife, and a brilliant young director who believes that the onetime star can be brought back into the theatre. It is a drama entirely about "the profession," dealing with rehearsals, out-of-town tryouts and

a triumphant first night. Such plays often have limited appeal, for actors are not always interesting to anybody but other actors and to producers of Technicolor musical movies. Mr. Odets has managed to make his stage people absorbingly human—so therefore he has written a good play.

Three Fine Actors.

Mr. Kelly is the drunk who is trying to come back. He is an excellent choice for the role, for, as anybody who saw him in "Command Decision" remembers, he is unusually gifted at conveying a

sense of spiritual torment. Here he is, dragged out of oblivion by an intense and enthusiastic young stage director and facing one final chance. He puts up a brave front, but his wife means more to him than even she realizes.

Miss Hagen's playing of the wife is admirable, being flexible, sensitive, quietly humorous when it needs to be—and good slam-bang histrionics in a couple of scenes. The third of the principals, Mr. Hill, is a newcomer to the stage so far as important roles go, and he is a credit to his profession. He plays the stage director with the certainty of a youth who is devoted to his trade and knows exactly what he is doing—and this is just what Mr. Odets must have

wanted from him. Mr. Hill's role and his performance are not unlike the work which brought Sam Wanamaker to attention in Maxwell Anderson's backstage play, "Joan of Arc."

Settings Made to Fit.

"The Country Girl" is an excellent professional job throughout. The supporting company is interesting—particularly Phyllis Love as a teen-age ingénue. Boris Aronson's settings which include a drab furnished room and a couple of dressing rooms, are spare and compact—the work of an artist who has read and got the meaning out of the play he has been commissioned to illustrate.

I don't think "The Country Girl" is a particularly happy title for Mr. Odets' play, for there is nothing bucolic about Miss Hagen's role. Perhaps it is meant ironically. But, anyhow, it's a title, and the play is the important thing. It's a well-made play, and it brings to the theatre some genuine excitement. Once again I can admire Mr. Odets as a dramatist, and can also congratulate him upon being an able editor and an intelligent director.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
November 11, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Expertly Anecdotal

CLIFFORD ODETS has written a fiercely affectionate anecdote about backstage doings in "The Country Girl," at the Lyceum. In the hands of Paul Kelly and Uta Hagen, his account of a stumble-bum actor making a come-back with the aid of his wife has a rueful eloquence. Rarely have players filled so small a situation with so much emotional impetus and theatrical effect. Moreover Steven Hill, in the part of a director, gives a fine edge of conflict to a drama in which very

little resides. Odets has written well and from the heart and he has staged his work exactly, even though it is lacking in the proportions to which it pretends.

The author's projection of a character whom he compares to the late Laurette Taylor is both acute and sympathetic. As played by Kelly, the one-time star is a fascinating dipsomaniac, still burning with latent talent. At the same time the young director who gives the actor another chance emerges with clarity in both the writing and Hill's acting. Miss Hagen, on the other hand, although she gives a superb performance, has less aid from the script in making a defined character. Since there is no resolution of the manner in which she brings her man back to his senses and

his former eminence, she is working with fragments for most of the time. She does wonders at making them seem whole.

Aside from the characterizations, which are rich and absorbing, the drama has little cumulative power. The director believes the actor's fabricated story that it is his wife who drove him to drink and fights it out with her for six or seven scenes, then falls in love with her and bows out of the picture as the star is re-born. At least this tiny structure has given Odets a marvelous chance to let one observe the inner workings of theatrical production, from the architectural task of the director to the inspiration, which makes an actor great in spite of his lines. As a treatise in the making of a show

"The Country Girl" is remarkable.

That is not what the author intended, of course, and fortunately the play is more than that. The early scenes in which Kelly is afraid to take a miraculous chance and Miss Hagen, almost deadened by her life with him, tells him to take it, ring with meaning and feeling. There is a superb passage as the actor cannot remember his lines at rehearsal and another in a Boston dressing room. The stars bring warmth and power to almost every scene, while Hill is properly intense. Louis Veda Quince, Joseph Sullivan and Phyllis Love are some of the people of the theater who populate this play about the theater. "The Country Girl" runs down a small hill, but it does so in a bravura manner.

Daily Mirror

November 11, 1950

'Country Girl' Is Effective Only Part of the Time

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Country Girl" is a play of muddled motivations and mixed qualities. When it's on the right track, the new Clifford Odets work is highly effective. But when it gets switched off to a wrong one, it's almost embarrassing. For too much of the evening, we couldn't bring ourselves to believe in it.

In the new arrival at the Lyceum Theatre, Odets retells the saga of the boozy, unreliable ham who gets another chance and makes good. The movies have done it dozens of times. In this instance, it's an arty, sentimental young director with a protective veneer of cynicism who gives the lush his opportunity. But it's

really his long-suffering, loyal wife who helps him come through.

The faded star is a childlike heel, but, like so many drunkards, he has the uncanny ability to make the unwary believe in his lies. However, it seemed to us that it took the terribly serious-minded, head-in-the-clouds young director a heck of a long time to get wise to the kind of prob-

lem he had on his hands.

Of course, they saw that love is akin to hate. But it was awfully hard for us to swallow when the strapping stager, who had hurled some pretty nasty epithets at the mature wife, suddenly discovered that he cared for her in a big way, in time to provide a corny renunciation scene. After all, this wasn't "Fata Morgana."

Dwight Deere Wiman has given the play an excellent production. Boris Aronson, using a bare stage and several small, grubby dressing room sets, has succeeded in achieving a remarkably atmospheric background. The cast is first-rate.

Paul Kelly is on the terrific side as the alcoholic, insecure liar. Uta Hagen is superlative as the less showy wife. Steven Hill, for whom we predicted big things after a Summer visit to the Westport Country Playhouse, has justified our judgment with his portrayal of the unevenly written part of the director.

Louis Veda Quince, Peter Kass, Joseph Sullivan and Phyllis Love do well by other roles.

Odets directed the script. That was, perhaps, unfortunate. Authors hate to sacrifice their own lines, or even change them. But we have a feeling that an outsider might have excised or rewritten several of the more purple passages, and made the dialogue seem less pretentious and more true to Broadway life.

Odets, at his best, has written keenly observant, at times witty, dialogue. But he has a tendency to make ordinary people talk like extraordinary people. We've been on the Big Stem for a long time, and seldom have we heard actors gab like this. Show people are really much more colloquial.

"The Country Girl," in sum, has so much to recommend it that we can only regret that it hasn't sufficient. But, in fairness to Wiman and Odets, we should report that a majority of the first-nighters blistered their palms applauding.

Journal American

November 11, 1950

An Engrossing Show; Last Scene Not Needed

By JOHN McCLAIN

"The Country Girl," a new play by Clifford Odets which opened at the Lyceum Theatre last night, is the story of a rum-riddled actor's struggle for regeneration and the travail of those closest to him—his wife and the director of the show.

Paul Kelly, in the role of a former Broadway star who allowed his early promise to become diluted by too much booze, is given a sudden and unexpected chance to come back as

the lead in a new production. Steven Hill, the prodigy director, sees in him the opportunity to score a surprise success.

Then enter Uta Hagen, Mr. Kelly's wife. In her efforts to protect her husband from his own weakness she alienates the director who, in his youthful enthusiasm, has accepted Odets's story that his wife drove him to drink.

It thus becomes a sort of strange triangle drama, with the wife and

the director fighting for the affection of the weak yet sympathetic actor.

Come the scene, naturally, when Kelly blows his top and belis the bottle, shortly after which the director discovers that the wife has been blameless all along and has stuck it out only through her maternal interest in her husband's helplessness.

At the same time the director realizes that he loves the wife.

In my agenda this is an engrossing show, well worth a visit. I believed the performance of Mr. Kelly, who slowly progressed from a trembling has-been to the cocksure ham who begins to take his unexpected revival with impolite acceptance. And I understood Uta Hagen in her unquestioning devotion, her final decision to stay with him as one would with an adopted child.

Steven Hill, as the Napoleonic young director, gives one of the

most facile performances of the season.

Clifford Odets developed these characters with care and patience; they are dimensional, they speak occasionally with humor and always with authority.

The acts by Boris Aronson seemed pleasantly authentic, especially Kelly's one-room walk-up, and Dwight Wiman's production gave the performers the sweep and scope they deserve.

I must confess that I got up and rushed up the aisle at the conclusion of the second scene of the last act. I discovered my mistake before leaving the theatre and remained to witness the remainder of the festivities as a standee.

Come to think of it, though, I'm not sure it wouldn't have been a bad idea if Mr. Odets had quit when I thought he had. I don't think he really needs that last scene.

"The Country Girl"—continued

New York Post HOME NEWS

November 12, 1950

The Welcome Return of Mr. Odets By Richard Watts Jr.

Out of the material of the most familiar of backstage plots, Clifford Odets has provided a tense and absorbing play, which offers cheering proof that the one-time master of the so-called "propaganda" drama can write with all his old skill and sensitivity when he gives up his contemplation of social problems and goes in for a straightforward story of love and the theatre. It is called "The Country Girl," and it was acted brilliantly at the Lyceum Friday night by a fine cast headed by Paul Kelly, Uta Hagen and Steven Hill. Among its other virtues, it gives Miss Hagen an opportunity for her most skillful performance.

The narrative is, indeed, so artfully and freshly managed in the writing and playing that it probably will not be until you are out of the playhouse that you will pause to remember how frequently the plot has been used by dramatists in the course of stage history. Under the tal-

ented Odets touch it doesn't seem to matter much, but what he has given us is the customary story of the alcoholic actor, whose weakness for drink has ruined his career, and who is helped in his comeback fight by the heroic loyalty of his faithful wife. It requires no small skill to make the familiar tale so dramatically arresting.

Triangle

Mr. Odets has, however, managed this minor miracle, not by any tricks of story-telling, but by observing his characters with such intelligent compassion and writing of them with all the

feeling for hapless humanity which made his social plays so exciting a feature of American playgoing in the thirties. In his hands, "The Country Girl" becomes a sort of triangle play of the theatre, in which the loyal wife and an earnest young stage director battle for the soul of the weak and selfish but once-great actor. It is no small triumph that the three of them somehow seem people worth bothering about.

Odets is, I think, particularly skillful in letting his characters develop as you see more and more of them. In a way, the story is seen through the eye of the director, who, from his youth, has worshipped the famous actor. At first, his admiration makes the husband's weakness seem a cruel result of the wife's neurotic selfishness, and the wife is apparently the poor fellow's evil genius. It is only slowly that it becomes evident that it is the husband who is guilty of pathological cruelty, through his inability to be honest about himself, while the wife is the victim of her gallant fidelity. By that time, you also come to see why the director was so mistaken in his judgment.

The Actor's Wife

Although the wife is the sympathetic figure of the story, in the usual fashion of such back-

stage stories, Mr. Odets never makes the error of being sloppily sentimental about her. She is not simply the long-suffering martyr of so many plays and movies. She has strength, courage and pride, and, with all her loyalty, there is a limit beyond which she will not surrender her personal identity to the husband who imposes on her. And, while the author has no illusion about the selfish weakness of the actor and the blindness of the director, he makes both of them worth a measure of sympathy. The backstage atmosphere is, of course, excellent, although the playwright of the story struck me as perhaps a trifle too meek.

Never before, it seems to me, has Miss Hagen played with anything near the moving excellence she reveals as the wife. It is one of the notable performances of the season. Mr. Kelly is always a splendid actor, and he plays the husband with complete honesty and none of the familiar clichés of such a role. Mr. Hill's performance as the director indicates that he is a man who is going to be heard of in the theatre. The author has also directed with skill, and Boris Aronson's sets are, of course, just what they should be. "The Country Girl" brings back Clifford Odets as a force in American playwrighting.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

November 11, 1950

'The Country Girl' a Problem in Suspense Odets' History of a Drunken Actor

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Modern drama.

Topic—Talent revived by faith.

Setting—Backstage.

Mood—Suspenseful, neurotic.

Reception—Tense, solid at finish.

I find it—Hypnotic though unbelievable.

In "The Country Girl," Clifford Odets is telling a story for its characters' sake. There is no particular moral—it is just about peo-

ple in a jam, trying to get out.

The play is an unusual problem, in that over half of it depends on intangible suspense the actors must sustain, more through suggestion than what they actually say.

It is also unusual in that the entire action is backstage or in an actor's apartment, but it never for a split second has any preten-

sions of glamour.

The Case of an Actor.

Odets is concerned here with the case of an actor, once highly successful, who is summoned from the depths of drunken failure by a youthful director's nostalgic admiration for him. The man's confidence is broken. In extreme sensitivity, he makes his wife ac-

cept the buck he passes, whenever he must make demands or assert himself.

The narrative grows from the effect this behavior has on the play's director, who believes the wife—just a "country girl"—is difficult and conniving, and jealous to the point of deliberately destroying her husband. The director is bitter over his own broken

"The Country Girl"—continued

marriage, and more than willing to think ill of women.

The first half of the play is extraordinarily tense, as the young director fights for the right to use the fading star in the play, then tries to protect him against his seemingly difficult wife.

Grows Contrived.

Somehow the intermission destroys the morbid tautness of the situation and the play afterward begins to grow contrived.

The subtle relationships need and get embroidery, but this decoration is rich with dramatic license. The director, it develops, actually loves the star's wife, whom he has treated so abominably.

To prove the unusual talent of the star, there is a sequence which involves his completely changing the lines of a major scene at the premiere, and beating an ingenue

until she rushes off the stage in hysterics.

By this time I found it difficult to care whether the star was a hit again or not, and found my reasons quite clear. This combination of Barrymore and Olivier is credited with a magical gift, the like of which this generation has only seen in Laurette Taylor. His talent is called improvisatory, which ought to scare any stage manager to death, with its suggestions of moody inspiration and no discipline.

Nowhere in the writing (except for the aforesaid ingenue beating) is there the stuff for conviction that the star actually has such a talent. And Paul Kelly is far too candid and sensitive an actor to suggest that he would rely for theatrical effect on an impromptu rage summoned at an opening, which he was unable to feel in nine weeks of rehearsal and playing out of town.

Uta Hagen Shines.

Mr. Kelly just can't help seeming a little absurd when, after a slow start, he rushes offstage panting into his dressing room, really hot now, with some more changes he has thought up for his next scene. This is more the pity because the quality of his childlike cowardice and vanity has previously been so clearly realized.

Steven Hill has the unsympathetic and complex role of the director. It is a well designed and elaborate character, vain, ambitious, bitter, demanding, calculating, and beneath it all very anxious. For the most part I liked the way Mr. Hill handled it. Only when he plays in high gear, in the "big" scenes, his lines come out sounding curiously like imitations of some other actor.

As the wife of the title, Uta Hagen is a luminous and steady-

ing influence. She plays in low key, weary and used to raw deals. By sheer concentration she spreads around the character an aura of lost hope, tottering pride and unrealized joy. This is beautiful, quiet acting.

It is not easy to convey her love for the star, who is written with little warmth or charm, but Miss Hagen gives the play a pattern of reality, which its theatricality nearly dissolves.

Much about this play delighted the theater-wise opening night audience. It is at once morbid enough to attract curiosity seekers, and fanciful enough to be accepted as gospel by them. I believe that one three-dimensional normal person in the picture would be a gauge against which you might measure these high-pressure neurotics, with a good deal more satisfaction than you can measure them against each other.

"The Lady's Not for Burning"

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

November 9, 1950

By **HOWARD BARNES**

Master Work

A POETIC fantasy of rare splendor and delight his distinguished the season. Christopher Fry's "The Lady's Not for Burning," which has come to the Royale Theatre from London, is a work of magical humor and deep beauty. John Gielgud, Pamela Brown and an immaculate company fully realize the richness of language the like of which has not been heard in the modern theater. Gielgud has staged the production as though the verse itself defined the action, ranging from the rowdy to the eloquently tender. Against a perfect 15th century setting by Oliver Messel, "The Lady's Not for Burning" is a true master work.

The influence of the Elizabethan theater is evident in the drama, from the blank verse to the varied sets of lovers and the loquacious clown. What Fry has achieved so brilliantly, however, is in transmuting an ancient form to his own uses and our particular appreciation. Through his scintillating cascades of words, filled with metaphors and epigrams, a multi-

tude of profundities may be detected. They will mean many things to many people, but they are there to enthrall the imagination of the spectator. Much of a skeleton plot is obscure, as a young man who finds life not salubrious meets an alchemist's daughter suspected of being a witch, but the communication of the poetry itself is as clear as all fine poetry and drama should be.

The author has achieved a beautiful balance between scenes of sheerest nonsense and extremely moving passages. Setting his play in the house of Hebble Tyson, mayor of the small market town of Cool Clary during "the 15th century either more or less or exactly," he has spun a rich tapestry without dropping a stitch. At one moment there is an uproarious hearing where the mayor refuses to hang a man who has confessed to several murders and is confounded by the declared innocence of a girl fleeing from a witch hunt. At the next there is one of the most eloquent and touching love scenes written in our times, as the waltz tries to make the world-sick youth declare his devotion. Not a great deal happens in terms of realistic or explicit theater, but the stage echoes and re-echoes with magnificent speech.

Whatever Director Gielgud's con-

tribution to "The Lady's Not for Burning," and it must have been very great indeed, the verse is always present to shape characters and implement the direction of events. Such comparatively minor persons as the mayor's sister, played superbly by Nora Nicholson, or the drowsy viol-playing chaplain of Eliot Makeham, who dreams that he is climbing a Jacob's ladder made of diminished sevenths, are funny and yet curiously real. Esme Percy has the same aid from the script in a properly short and merry appearance as the rags and bones man who causes most of the commotion. Elegance and earthiness find a happy meeting place throughout the offering.

To name a few assistants before the stars is merely one way to emphasize the wholeness and enchantment of "The Lady's Not for Burning." Gielgud dominates most of the action, as he should, and does so superlatively. His Thomas Mendip, jesting with himself and denying the worth of life even to the ending where he accepts a charming creature as a shield from his defeatism, is powerful in speech and gesture. Miss Brown, as the girl who is thought a creature of the devil because she talks French to her French poodle and has dinner with her peacock, is so lovely and assured that it is no wonder that Fry wrote his fantastical com-

"THE LADY'S NOT FOR BURNING"

Comedy by Christopher Fry; staged by John Gielgud; settings by Oliver Messel; presented by Atlantis Productions at the Royale Theatre, November 8, 1950. The cast:

Richard.....Richard Burton
Thomas Mendip...John Gielgud
Alizon Eliot...Penelope Munday
Nicholas Devise...David Evans
Margaret Devise.....

Nora Nicholson
Humphrey Devise.....

Richard Leech
Hebble Tyson...George Howe
Jennet Jourdemayne....

Pamela Brown
The Chaplain...Eliot Makeham
Edward Tappercoom...Peter Bull
Matthew Skips...Esme Percy

Synopsis: Scene—A room in the house of Hebble Tyson, Mayor of the small market town of Cool Clary. Time—The 15th Century either more or less exactly. Act I. An afternoon in April. Act II. An hour later, Act III. Later the same night.

edy for her. Together they have at the world with zest, wisdom, compassion and deep humor. Richard Burton, George Howe and David Evans are only a few others who can be mentioned at this writing in collaborating on a challenging and memorable drama.

"The Lady's Not for Burning"—continued

New York Post HOME NEWS

November 9, 1950

The Challenge of Christopher Fry By Richard Watts Jr.

The much-discussed "romantic comedy" from London, Christopher Fry's "The Lady's Not for Burning," made its local debut at the Royale last night, where it proved to be a play of rare and highly-specialized quality, witty, intellectually playful, frankly artificial, more than a little precious, written with a cool poetic beauty hardly ever encountered in the contemporary theatre, and seemingly not very interested in the warmth of emotion. Beautifully and artfully acted by John Gielgud, Pamela Brown and a fine English company, it is, whatever else may be said about it, a work of authentic literary stature.

I am glad that, among my critical duties, there does not lie the obligation to predict the success of a play or to tell people whether or not they are going to like it. All that I can even promise to do is attempt to set down, as well as I can, the nature and quality of the work and my

own frankly personal reaction to it. Then it is up to you. With this in view, I can proceed to tell you that I found "The Lady's Not for Burning" steadily interesting, distinguished in its sheer verbal pyrotechnics, often a little annoying in its mannered perversity, and curiously lacking in human feeling.

Demand on Audiences

Mr. Fry is a bold, free spirit in playwriting, and he demands that his audiences bring certain definite intellectual qualities to the theatre with them. Never a man to say things simply or directly

when he can set them down obliquely and circuitously, his play calls for an interest in words and ideas for their own sake, in the proud lyricism of his sometimes complicated verse, in the sound as well as the meaning of his phrases, in the playful wit of his ideas, in an almost pedantic intellectual preoccupation with all kinds of learning, and in the creation of a mood of coldly ironic romanticism.

His interest in character and story is clearly secondary. Here he is telling of a bitter and deeply misanthropic ex-soldier who tries to get himself hanged for a murder he didn't commit to save an innocent young woman from being burned as a witch. But, even if he is much interested in his people and narrative, which I doubt, he certainly reveals little effort to make his audiences emotionally concerned with them. "The Lady's Not for Burning" is, I think, fascinating esthetically and intellectually, but the interest is curiously detached and lacking in humanity. It appeals to the mind and doesn't trouble much about the heart.

Appeal to Ear

There is reason to believe that the modern realistic drama, whatever its virtues, has done over

theatre the ill-service of making the ear of present-day playgoers insensitive. It seems to me that there is so much pleasure to be found in the verbal fireworks—although "fireworks" is perhaps too warm a word for so cool a comedy—of Christopher Fry, in his erudite but none the less delightful wit, and in the debonaire fashion in which he tosses off ideas in a line or two that the absence of conventional dramatic interest becomes fairly unimportant. But I wish he weren't quite so precious and stylized.

Mr. Gielgud is, of course, at his best in plays that are precious and stylized, and he is a joy to watch and listen to as the embittered ex-soldier. Miss Brown comes very close to perfection as the girl. I particularly liked Elliot Makeham as an ancient chaplain and Peter Bull as a bulky justice, and Penelope Munday is charming in the small role of a young woman about to be given in marriage. But, indeed, all of the players are excellent, if occasionally a trifle inaudible, and the sets and costumes of Oliver Messel are just right. Mr. Fry is a writer of challenging distinction, if still a rather too perverse dramatist.

DAILY NEWS

November 9, 1950

'Lady's Not for Burning' a Lovely Production of a Literary Whatsit

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Christopher Fry's comedy in verse, "The Lady's Not for Burning" is a curious play, and it got curiously and curiously last evening as it went along for its premiere at the

Royale Theatre. At its end I came away from it with a mounting dislike for the English language and a hot desire to hear Miss Pamela Brown talk the English language as long as breath is left in her.

The play is beautifully produced, and such actors as Miss Brown, John Gielgud, Elliot Makeham and Esmé Percy give it fine style and grace. Production and actors have been brought in a body from London, where "The Lady's Not for Burning" has had great success, and they are admirable representatives of the British theatre. One could ask for nothing better than Mr. Gielgud in the role of a three-syllable Errol Flynn, or Mr. Make-

ham as a scene-stealing character actor, or the aforementioned Miss Brown as a witch.

Unless, perhaps, one should ask to see them and their fellow players in something by Shakespeare or some other minor poet. I have seen two of these verse plays by Christopher Fry now, and am beginning to suspect that he is a literary prankster of immense proportions. His device is to write English until it pours over the stage apron in a veritable flood. He has a florid style which is so grand it almost begins to mean something, and just when a passage is

about to become unbearable he finishes it off with a modern-language wisecrack.

A Literary Trick

This literary trick has made Mr. Fry quite a man in the London theatre, where he is known as a wit. He is regarded, and seems to regard himself, as a combination of Shakespeare and Groucho Marx. He may have the same success here, and if he does I will not begrudge him this success. His play is capably set, costumed, lighted and spoken, and as a production it is worthy of the combined efforts of its sponsors—the Theatre Guild, Tennent Productions Ltd. and John C. Wilson, who have banded themselves into an organization bearing the formidable title of Atlantis Productions. But I, poor soul, just can't get it.

To me, "The Lady's Not for Burning" is an odd and monumentally pretentious opera libretto in which the well-spoken Mr. Gielgud falls in love with the beautifully-spoken Miss Brown while they are wearing Fifteenth Century costumes. Mr. Gielgud is very cynical about the world and, in a desire to leave it, confesses to a murder and asks if somebody won't please hang him. Miss Brown has been seized as a witch and is slated to be cremated from scratch. After several acts in which the author delivers himself of nasty opinions about the human race, Gielgud and Brown are united in the bonds of warm affection. They go out into the garden somewhere and the audience goes home.

Christopher Fry is not my type of prankster. I don't think his verse is any too good, and his bright cynicism seems juvenile. You might think otherwise. You might find "The Lady's Not for Burning" a fine hunk of literature. And I assure you that you will admire the performances of the principals and will have a special affection for Mr. Makeham, who is superbly comic in the role of a chaplain. In fact, I think Mr. Makeham is the only one of the outfit who has caught on to Mr. Fry and thinks Mr. Fry is unconsciously funny.

"The Lady's Not for Burning"—continued

Daily Mirror

November 9, 1950

'Lady's Not for Burning' A Distinguished Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Atlantis Productions (The Theatre Guild, Tennant Productions, Ltd., and John C. Wilson) finally gave New Yorkers the opportunity to see "The Lady's Not For Burning," by Christopher Fry, Britain's current wonder boy, last evening at the Royale Theatre. This romantic comedy, set in 15th century England, ran for 300 performances in London.

"The Lady's Not For Burning" has to do with a cynical ex-soldier who, coming to a town where an attractive and intelligent young woman is accused of witchcraft, charges himself with murder and demands the gallows, to save her

from death at the stake and to enjoy a moment of swashbuckling heroism. The disillusioned warrior eventually succumbs to that perennial emotion, love, and both prisoners are saved from their immediate fates.

The new arrival is a lengthy

play. The first two acts are mainly concerned with a statement of Fry's philosophy. He doesn't think much of the world. He considers it a place of heart-break for sensitive people. It is ruled by greed, lust and violence. But nature has a way of making us accept it.

Only in the third act is the philosophy translated into terms of action. Only then can you understand what the leading characters really are and what the author means them to represent. It almost has the aspects of a mystery play, wherein you get the denouement late in the evening.

Though Fry's philosophy is cynical, and even bitter, he states it with gaiety and humor. It is written in singing and witty verse. It is verse, however, that demands constant attention if it is to prove rewarding. The result is a play hardly gaited to the escapist playgoer. You have to give it much to get much from

it.

John Gielgud and Pamela Brown play the soldier and the "witch" with triumphant style and effect. Elliot Makeham contributes an utterly delightful portrait of a simple and amiable chaplain. Nora Nicholson, Esme Percy, George Howe and Peter Bull offer amusing characterizations. And salutes also are due Richard Burton, Penelope Munday, David Evans and Richard Leech.

Gielgud's direction is robustly graceful. It does justice to the Fry verse without emphasizing the fact that it is verse. It and Oliver Messel's superb decor ably catch the spirit and atmosphere of a salty and superstitious era.

"The Lady's Not for Burning" is a distinguished play, though it may not prove a popular one over here. We suspect that it is for the few rather than the many.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

November 9, 1950

King's English Gets Royal Treatment

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Lyric comedy; English.
Setting—Medieval village.
Nature—Romantic and eloquent.
Mood—Frisivolous.
Virtue—Imaginative poetry.

I find it—Language in full bloom.

If you have very deep regard for the English tongue, and the flights and twists with which imagination and ripe wit can express ideas, "The Lady's Not for Burning" is a downright must.

Its author, Christopher Fry, has in a few years sprung into the position of foremost dramatic poet in the language. This play is probably his best to date.

It is unusual, difficult to classify. To the question, "What's it about?" there is no ready satis-

factory answer. It concerns a girl due to be hanged as a witch for having turned a ragman into a dog. Simultaneously, a cynical wanderer tries to be hanged for the murder of the same ragman. They fall in love, she glowingly, he unwillingly. And the ragman turns up, still human and alive.

Minor Loves.

That is all there is for story, except for the mild byplay of a couple of minor loves. What happens is nothing. Interest is on the characters, what they think and how they say it.

They talk like Mercutio's Queen Mab speech from "Romeo," drawn in varying moods. There is wit and radiance and bite in the language. There is also an occasional trick of using a phrase that

sounds oddly modern, until you remind yourself that interjections like "the Hell with it" are timeless.

Quoting is the only way to convey the flavor of fantasy and imagery that prevails in the play. For instance, a boy with a bleeding forehead speaks of "a splash from the cherry red river that drives my mill." Of the crickets' chirp, a girl says, "Night air is riding on a creaking saddle."

There is glorious invective, and such rich double talk as "amphigourous, stultiloquent fiddle-faddle." There are flights of fancy which in time seem quite natural, such as the fact that the heroine speaks French to her poodle, and always has her peacock in to Sunday dinner.

Eminently Actable.

Most of these people talk as if they had bumped their heads sharply on stars. They are anything but literal, yet they are fascinatingly realistic about themselves, as is the boy who was found as an infant stuffed into a poorbox, and says, "I wasn't born. I was come across."

What Fry writes is eminently actable, too, if you are willing to listen to a costume play without duels or wrestling matches. Visually it is pretty inanimate, and there are passages, as in the second act, when one's attention is flooded with words. But most of the time a wary ear is well re-

warded.

John Gielgud and Pamela Brown are co-starred as the cynic and the witch. Mr. Gielgud has all the eloquence and the physical grace his part demands. I felt last night that he was overanxious, as if he loved the play too well. Relaxed, he will seem more taunting and less carefully musical.

Miss Brown won this heart three years ago here with her great beauty and style. Pictorially lovely in this, she yet accepts the stark challenge that this is a play to which an audience must listen. She reads with precision and infinite clarity, always regarding the thought behind the words before the meter of the line.

Speech Perfectionist.

Listen to every letter as she pronounces—"drifts," or something like "imminent cataclysm." You'll agree she joins that small select company of speech perfectionists to which in the last year only Grace George and Ethel Merman unqualifiedly belong.

Of the supporting roles, I particularly liked the chaplain of Elliot Makeham, the mother of Nora Nicholson, and the eloper of Penelope Munday.

The play's wit often makes you comment or pleasurably sigh rather than roar. It leaves you slightly disembodied in fancy, too. Last night's audience demanded nine curtain calls, and the applause on the last was still vastly increasing over that for the first.